

417 of 763 DOCUMENTS

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Readers armed with data on Civil War forts

BYLINE: Michael Barnes American-Statesman Staff**SECTION:** LIFESTYLE; Pg. D01**LENGTH:** 1049 words

A recent column about three virtually forgotten Confederate forts in Austin ignited the imagination of readers.

Some had actually spent time inside the ruins of former Fort Magruder at South Congress Avenue and Ben White Boulevard. Charles Dahlstrom, 86, of Fredericksburg grew up nearby and recalls playing among the earthworks.

"We also dug in and around the trenches without any luck," he writes. "But we had many a good time playing in the trenches."

Mae Dell Griffith's memories of Fort Magruder are not so fond. In 1947, her family of seven was forced to leave home in East Austin to make way for returning war veterans. Her father purchased a small, unfinished house on a rural hill above the fort's ruins.

"I was about 12 years old at that time," she writes. "And I hated to walk down into that 'big ditch,' as we called it, to go to the small grocery store that was on South Congress."

Two readers pointed out that there's a similarly configured Fort Magruder, also named for Gen. John Magruder, in Williamsburg, Va.

Carol Binford reminded me that Fortview Road - which echoes the 19th-century Fortview subdivision discussed in the column - extends from near Clawson Road to the Victory Medical Center. That's a bit of a trot from the fort's hilltop site.

Several readers distinguished between Post Road Drive, which formed the northern boundary of the fort, and Post Road, which links Live Oak Street to South Congress Avenue in Travis Heights. Both are presumably remnants of a trail out of town.

I had mentioned in the column that no historical marker rises at the site of Fort Magruder. In fact, records show there is a state marker, but not located there. The Texas Historical Commission online atlas places it on the other side of South Congress from the fort's location. I haven't found it yet.

Ron Thrower provided more useful information. He sent a precise plan of the Fort Magruder site. He also suggested that the hurried Texas Department of Transportation archaeological survey in the 1980s - commissioned so that Ben White could be widened - didn't dig too deep. So underneath all the trash that accumulated in the trenches, there might still be 19th-century relics, right where you order your P. Terry's burger now.

Thrower also sent a translation from the memoirs of Getulius Kellersberger, the Confederate fort's engineer. It recounts how 500 slaves were conscripted in La Grange late in 1863 and then moved to Austin in bitter cold. "Sunday night we arrived in Austin," Kellersberger wrote. "People stared at us very curiously and our arrival caused a great deal of anxiety."

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Elizabeth Schnelle wrote to say that her husband's great-grandfather was the engineer Kellersberger, whose name was shortened to "Julius Kellersberg" or "Kellersburg" by different historians. He also was responsible for the fortifications at Sabine Pass during the same war.

What of the city's other two Civil War forts? Fort Colorado, located in East Austin on the road to Bastrop and Houston, poses fresh mysteries. A historical marker about the fort was placed near Webberville Road and Heflin Lane in 1936.

It turns out, however, there might have been two forts using that name, one near the confluence of the Colorado River and Boggy Creek, the other more northerly at the aptly named Fort Branch fed by Pecan Springs (the spring, not the road), says water specialist Steve Stecher.

One Fort Colorado was also known as Coleman's Fort - or Fort Coleman - and also Fort Houston, according to reader Ralph Newlan.

"(It) consisted of two two-story blockhouses and a number of cabins enclosed within a high stockade wall," he details. "It was built during the fall of 1836 by Col. Robert M. Coleman and first garrisoned by two or three companies of his ranger battalion."

Newlan says a Southwestern Historical Quarterly article published in 1969 describes limited archaeological digs undertaken in 1965.

To confuse matters further, later maps labeled the more northerly site Fort Prairie. We'll continue to investigate.

Let's turn to the third Confederate fort shown on the turn-of-the-century map reproduced in the previous column: College Hill. Engineer Kellersberger mentioned that one could see the other Confederate forts from the College Hill citadel. (Try that today.)

Some readers confused this spot with the high point where the University of Texas built Old Main and, later, the UT Tower. Instead, it refers to the slot on Edwin Waller's 1839 city plan reserved for a future college. That city plan put it approximately at West 15th Street and West Avenue, familiar as the site of the Caswell House. Anyone who has stood on that ridge high above Shoal Creek can confirm the logic of that location, but mostly for defense against raiding Comanches from the west. Indeed, just up Shoal Creek near the St. Andrew's School campus, an Indian skirmish took place.

Readers have promised to keep a sharp eye out for remains at College Hill, but I've discovered nothing more at the site.

Sel Graham urged me to write more about U.S. Army encampments during Reconstruction. "The Sixth U.S. Cavalry Regiment was located at what is now Austin High School," Graham writes. "(It) was one of the regiments of Maj. Gen. George Armstrong Custer's Cavalry Division, which was the Army of Occupation of Central Texas in 1865 after the Civil War ended."

Graham reminded us that Custer kept his headquarters in the Old Blind Asylum, a handsome building that is now the UT Arno Nowotny Building at the southwest corner of Interstate 35 and Martin Luther King Jr. Boulevard.

"Gen Custer and his wife, Libby, enjoyed picnics on the summit of Mount Bonnell," Graham continues. "They would take the Sixth Cavalry Band to the summit since the music, especially the Anvil Chorus, echoed so grandly among the peaks."

Reader Bob Cavendish added that the Confederates built an armory on **Waller Creek** near the original Palm School building, which now houses government offices. This factory complemented the war materials plant that used slave labor at Anderson Mill. "The Confederacy never took off as an industrial power," Cavendish wrote. "While this enterprise did not produce a significant level of artillery, it did serve as a repair and fabrication point for farm implements in central Texas."

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